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Statement on Afghanistan Stability, Security Update **12/11/07**

As the senior Colorado delegation member of the House Armed Services Committee, U.S. Rep. Mark Udall, D-Eldorado Springs, released the following statement in response to testimony from U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates at a House Armed Service Committee Hearing today regarding security and stability issues in Afghanistan, with the focus on the status of U.S. strategy, operations and our next steps forward:

“Secretary Gates tells us today that there is reason for optimism in Afghanistan, tempered by caution. He cited progress in infrastructure improvements and ‘projects that will have real impact on the lives of the citizens’ and some improvements in the Afghan Army and police under NATO’s watch. He also called for a civilian coordinator of the international aid presence in Afghanistan.

“But Secretary Gates also talked about significant problems, among them corruption in the Afghan police, insurgent and Al Qaeda sanctuaries in Pakistan and weapons and financing from Iran, and the increasing problem of poppy cultivation and the nexus between drug-traffickers and the Taliban. And perhaps most significantly, NATO isn’t providing all the necessary troops, equipment, and other resources, a result of poor coordination, national restrictions, and equipment and resource shortfalls.

“In his testimony today, Secretary Gates called for American unity in urging NATO to commit more troops and resources.

“I agree that the U.S. Congress should echo this call for a greater commitment from our NATO allies. Time is of the essence, since the insurgency in Afghanistan has escalated in the last year, with attacks on U.S., Afghan, and NATO forces at their highest and most sophisticated since the U.S. invasion in 2001.

“But we need to look at other possible solutions to the shortfalls, and in my view, we need look no further than Iraq.

“Secretary Gates appeared to agree in a briefing with Members of Congress in October, when he said that there are not enough troops and resources in Afghanistan, and that the war in Iraq has contributed to the inability of U.S. forces to decisively defeat the Taliban there.

“Yet just today, Secretary Gates rejected a Marine Corps proposal to redeploy Marine forces from Anbar province in Iraq to Afghanistan, saying that while he understands the merits of the proposal, ‘Anbar is still a volatile place.’

“This highlights my continuing concern that U.S. operations in Iraq are taking up a disproportionate amount of this nation’s blood and treasure.”

“As a member of the House Armed Services Committee, I am deeply committed to helping our nation win the fight against the forces of terrorism, but I worry that those forces appear to be thriving in the border areas of Pakistan and Afghanistan. We can’t ignore the international security challenge posed by extremist Islamic groups like Al Qaeda, yet we are at risk of doing just that if we do not soon lighten our footprint in Iraq and devote more resources to the fight in Afghanistan.”

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